

THE ENTOMOLOGY OF THE HIEROGLYPHICS OF HORAPOLLO

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If Horapollo is remembered at all by entomologists, it is probably in connection with his misconceptions concerning the scarab. Living perhaps during the fourth or fifth century, he is supposed to have taught at Alexandria and Constantinople and to have been the author of two volumes, written in the Egyptian language, presumably explaining the symbols inscribed upon the Egyptian monuments. His work exists only in a Greek translation made by one Philip who is thought to have lived a century or two later than the author. As it will be noted, Horapollo has more to say about the scarab than about other insects, nevertheless he does mention other species such as flies, wasps, ants, gnats and grasshoppers.

The following extracts from Horapollo's works have been taken from A. T. Cory's translation¹ of the Greek text, and most of them contain a reference to some insect. Horapollo had much to say about other animals, too, such as the hyena, the beaver, the pigeon, the basilisk, etc., and repeated many of the apocryphal conceptions of Aristotle, Pliny, Aelian and other ancient precursors. His animals serve as symbols for one thing or another, and the quotations, although referring mainly to insects, are fair samples of his method of treatment.

"How an only begotten.

"To denote an only begotten, or generation, or a father, or the world, or a man, they delineate a Scarabaeus. And they symbolise by this an only begotten, because the scarabaeus is a creature self-produced, being unconceived by a female; for the propagation of it is unique after this manner:—when the male is desirous of procreating, he takes dung of an ox, and shapes

¹ The Hieroglyphics of Horapollo Nilous, 1840, London.

it into a spherical form like the world; he then rolls it from the hinder parts from east to west, looking himself towards the east, that he may impart to it the figure of the world, (for that is borne from east to west, while the course of the stars is from west to east): then, having dug a hole, the scarabaeus deposits this ball in the earth for the space of 28 days, (for in so many days the moon passes through the twelve signs of the zodiac). By thus remaining under the moon, the race of scarabaei is endued with life; and upon the nine and twentieth day after having opened the ball, it casts it into the water, for it is aware that upon that day the conjunction of the moon and sun takes place, as well as the generation of the world. From the ball thus opened in the water, the animals, that is the scarabaei issue forth. The scarabaeus also symbolizes generation, for the reason before mentioned—and a father, because the scarabaeus is engendered by a father only—and the world, because in its generation it is fashioned in the form of the world—and a man because there is no female race among them. Moreover there are three species of scarabaei, the first like a cat, and irradiated, which species they have consecrated to the sun from this similarity: for they say that the male cat changes the shape of the pupils of his eyes according to the course of the sun: for in the morning at the rising of the god, they are dilated, and in the middle of the day become round, and about sunset appear less brilliant: whence, also, the statue of the god in the city of the sun is of the form of a cat. Every scarabaeus also has thirty toes, corresponding with the thirty days duration of the month, during which the rising sun [moon?] performs his course. The second species is the two horned and bull formed, which is consecrated to the moon; when the children of the Egyptians say, that the bull in the heavens is the exaltation of this goddess. The third species is the one horned and Ibis formed, which they regard as consecrated to Hermes [Thoth], in like manner as the bird Ibis.” (Book I, X.)

“How they denote Hephaestus [Phthah].

“To denote Hephaestus [Phthah], they delineate a scarabaeus and a vulture, and to denote Athena [Neith],² a vulture and a

²“To denote Phthah they delineate a scarabaeus; and a vulture, to denote Neith?”

scarabaeus; for to them the world appears to consist both of male and female, (for Athena [Neith] however they also depict a vulture) and according to them, these are the only Gods who are both male and female." (Book I, XII.)

"How a man that has not travelled abroad.

"To symbolize a man that has not travelled out of his own country, they delineate an onoccephalus [creature with an ass's head], because he is neither acquainted with history, nor conversant with foreign affairs." (Book I, XXIII.)

"How they denote an imperfect man.

"To denote an imperfect man, they delineate a frog, because it is generated from the slime of the river, whence it occasionally happens that it is seen with one part of a frog, and the remainder formed of slime, so that should the river fall, the animal would be left imperfect." (Book I, XXV.)

"How Impudence.

"To denote impudence, they represent a fly, for this, though perpetually driven away, nevertheless returns." (Book I, LI.)

"How a murderer, or the blood of a crocodile.

"A wasp flying in the air signifies either the noxious blood of a crocodile, or a murderer." (Book II, XXIV.)

"What they denote by engraving origanum (wild marjoram) for a hieroglyphic.

"When they would symbolise the departure of ants, they engrave origanum. For if this plant be laid down over the spot from whence the ants issue forth, it causes them to desert it." (Book II, XXIV.)

"How they denote wasps.

"When they would denote wasps, they depict a dead horse; for many wasps are generated from him when dead." (Book II, XLIV.)

"How a swarm of gnats.

"When they would represent many gnats swarming together, they depict maggots; for from them gnats are engendered." (Book II, XLVII.)

"How a mystic man.

"When they would symbolise a mystic man, and one initiated, they delineate a grasshopper; for he does not utter sounds

through his mouth, but chirping by means of his spine, sings a sweet melody." (Book II, LV.)

"How a man that never stirs out.

"When they would symbolise a man that never stirs out, they depict an ant and the wings of a bat; because, when these wings are placed over an ant's nest, none of them come forth." (Book II, LXIV.)

From the foregoing it is apparent that Horapollo was not much of an entomologist, and according to Thorndike³ neither does he rank high as a philologer, an archaeologist or as an astronomer.

³ A History of Magic and Experimental Science (New York, 1923).